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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



## THE CHRONOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF PLEISTOCENE ART IN SIBERIA

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Some basic features characterize modern human sign behaviour in early Upper Palaeolithic archaeological assemblages. The main group in Siberian Pleistocene art includes personal ornamentation, part of a symbolic system (perforated animal teeth, shells, stone and bone pendants), and musical instruments (for example, whistles or flutes made out of bird bones).

The region under investigation is located in a contact zone of different landscape areas in northern and central Asia. While Siberian Upper Palaeolithic sites are rather numerous, it is so far difficult to estimate beginnings due to a lack of reliable dates and to the absence of a detailed technical or typological analysis of industries. Studies of key geoarchaeological sections in Siberia have made it possible to reconstruct the environmental conditions of Palaeolithic human occupations, and to build a general chronological scheme for the main stages of human cultures.

Middle and Upper Palaeolithic sites may have co-existed in Siberia for a long time, from about 50 000 to 27 000 BP. Obviously, more work needs to be done in order to better understand the chronological and archaeological patterns of this process, as recently shown in discussions about the Eurasian record of the Middle to Upper Palaeolithic transition and the origin of Upper Paleolithic cultural phenomena. More than 500 absolute dates are available for the Siberian Upper Palaeolithic complexes, based on traditional as well as new dating techniques (e.g.  $^{14}\text{C}$ , RTL, thermo-gravimetry).

Recent discoveries of Early Upper Palaeolithic series of artefacts indicate the existence of symbolic traditions, with more than 100 items from bone, stone, shell and sea shells. Artefacts were unearthed from stratified sites such as Tolbor (Mongolia, excavation of S.A. Gladishev); Kamenka, Varvarina Gora, Khotykh (Transbaikalia, excavation of L.V. Lbova); Podzvonkaya (Transbaikalia, excavation of V.I. Tashak); Voennyi Gospital, Pereselencheskiy punkt-1 (sub-Baikal region, excavations of D. Chersky [1871], G.I. Medvedev and E.A. Lipnina); Kara-Bom, Denisova Cave, Strashnaya Cave (Altai-region, excavation of A.P. Okladnikov, A.P. Derevianko, V.T. Petrin, M.V. Shun'kov, A.N. Zenin), Malaya Syia (Sayan-region, excavation of V.E. Larichev, Y.P. Kholushkin). These complexes are dated in the range of 30-43 ka, and related technologically to the initial stage of the Upper Palaeolithic. Particularly interesting are the archaeological and chronological contexts of artefacts (living horizons, structure of sequence, placing features...), and the items themselves, their morphological, technological and semantic characteristics. Research of early symbolic human activity, cultural archetypes origin and forming in Early Upper Palaeolithic in Siberia are based on technological and morphological analysis of items showing symbolic behaviour, as a basis for study and interpretation of these materials.

Functional research of artefact production technology is based on the wear-analysis method. We also used the synthesized tracing technique developed by P. V. Volkov and adapted for work with Palaeolithic and Neolithic archaeological assemblages in northern Asia. Production and wear evidence of artefacts along with experimental technological research allow us to reconstruct the technological process of manufacturing lithics.

Several unique artefacts of the EUP (35-40 ka) with a different geometrical form and morphological features form a special group. These are: bead from talc, agalmotolit (steatite) of lenticular shape, a unique elongated pendant with central by-conical hole, a sub-square bone bead (Strashnaya Cave, Tolbor, Denisova Cave), and items of ostrich eggshell with drilling (Podzvonkaya). Ornamented stone pendants in archaeological collections are dated to 25-30 ka (Khotyk 2, Pereselencheskyi punkt-1). However, ornamentation of decorations did not occur in early assemblages, dated to 35-40 ka.

A separate mention should be made of the findings of musical instruments in the early Upper Palaeolithic layers in the Baikal-zone: a fragment of a flute (Khotyk) and a whistle (Kamenka-A), similar to some from German excavations.

Geoarchaeological methods, meant to elaborate detailed local chrono-stratigraphic and cultural-historical schemes, have led to identifying chronologically divergent sites in southern Siberia. The Early Upper Palaeolithic is represented by two technological trends, the predominant one based on blade production (two versions of the industrial complex – the tradition of Kara-Bom and the tradition of Kara-Kol), and the secondary one on other reduction techniques (e.g. orthogonal cores and flake tools). In our view, there is little if any continuity between Middle and Upper Palaeolithic assemblages. Generally, cultural complexes associated with anatomically modern humans appeared in the region around 40 000-50 000 <sup>14</sup>C BP. The appearance of art at that time in Siberia (Denisova Cave, Khotyk, Kamenka-A, Podzvonkaya...) indicates an origin of symbolic behaviour in Siberia much earlier than previously thought.





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